

SeFa LoCo + Ragin
Entanglements

Summit Quartet
New Air

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RIGHT BRAIN RECORDS

Right Brain Records has released a couple of albums featuring Wyoming-based percussionist Ron Coulter. *Entanglements* is the new offering from the group Sefa LoCo + Ragin, a collective of free improvisors born of the Creative Music Series in Casper, Wyoming, here joined by trumpeter Hugh Ragin, who has extensive jazz and free jazz credits, including performing with Roscoe Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, and Maynard Ferguson. The second recording is *New Air* by the Summit Quartet, a new group of free jazz veterans, including pianist Walter Thompson, who is perhaps best known for his live composition method *Soundpainting*, and has also performed with Anthony Braxton, as well as John Zorn and numerous international orchestras.

Entanglements boasts three dense, but drama-filled tracks of experimentation, with a healthy dose of electronic effects, but not so much as might overpower the humanity of the ensemble interaction. The most striking, and complimentary, thing one can say about this collection of improvisations is that they conjure fantastic imagery, such as the first track, “Dust Off,” which begins with what can only be described as the sound of a warped and lovesick washing machine begrudgingly carrying out its meaningless duties against its will. Ragin joins this low rumbling, peppering the landscape with pointillist trumpet stabs, as Coulter brings in his bandmates (Bret Sexton, sax; Mike Facey, bass; Farrell Lowe, guitar) and their free for all rolls along without a discernible pulse before the musicians find a common groove. There are moments here when the guitar’s searching, sliding notes pair with a rolling snare drum and longer tones on the trumpet, evoking the feeling of being on psychedelics whilst traveling stormy seas on a pirate ship. The groove devolves, and the John Stevens “click piece” approach emerges, which is simply to say that the sonic landscape has become a series of short, curt gestures by all involved.

The following two tracks show off the high levels of communication that can be found with this group. “Expensive” is an eight-minute track that commences with some bell and cymbal flourishes and a reflective trumpet, as if a small collection of half-insane squirrels got loose in a clock-repair shop, who are subsequently being watched over by a melancholy snow owl. After the intensity grows, then simmers down, saxophonist Bret Sexton takes the lead, painting a tapestry of melody that is not simply polytonal or atonal, but questioning and evocative. Bret hands the reins over to guitarist Farrell Lowe, who has a quiet conversation with bassist Mike Facey, as Coulter accents their finer points on cymbals. “I-25 Deletion” is the longest track on the record, clocking in at just over 22 minutes. Air and space are plentiful, as the horns and arco bass take their time setting the scene. It’s as if we are listening to the sounds of the wind passing slowly through ragged sails on an unnaturally shallow sea at dusk. The arc of the performance traverses many conversations and combinations of musicians, and much more could be said of their prowess for creating such diverse and imaginative textures. These artists know exactly when and when not to play in service of the greater good, and the results are not just delightful, but also reveal greater depths upon repeated listens. Group dynamics, textures, and play are a huge part of this album. Highly recommended listening.

New Air by Summit Quartet runs nine tracks long and veers closer to modern jazz or free jazz than the more open free improvisation of *Entanglements*. Drums and saxophone trade rhythmic arguments, as the piano ponders its own existence with atonal chord clusters on the first track, "Dive." These tracks are more tone poems, more like one-off textural settings than of stories told. There is an element of humor and of irreverence that never crosses the line into the profane. And even though these players are all clearly masters of technique and feel, there are times when the performances don't quite gel, and the ideas offered don't quite land. Track two, "Shards of Floor," begins with wide piano voicings and squealing saxophone, while the bass creates a bed of high clicks. There are sparse chirps and scrapes amidst a wind chime sounding off, while there is an audible, guttural throat clearing in the middle of the track, like a pelican clearing its throat. It is an airy, polyrhythmic piece without much arc.

"Ballading Disturbance," the album's third track, grasps a cohesion that is welcomed, as the whistled melody of a descending major third is accompanied by bowed cymbal harmonics. This major third melody is echoed in the piano later, as austere dyads, after a period of chimes and arco bass gives way to the whispers of saxophone and brushed drums. This is the quietest track by volume, but it speaks the loudest with its clarity of vision and execution.

The rest of the tracks on *New Air* share similarities with the first three, and never quite distinguish themselves, as the searching quality of the performances can feel like they've gotten lost along the way. Track 5, "The Intensity," starts out very active, with bowed cymbals and toneless air pushed through horns goaded on by the sound of a voice emitting some type of ancient screams. Pulsating piano chords accompany this indecipherable voice that chatters on. An uptempo, chromatic pitch set on piano conjures a high, harmonic tone that seemingly never abates for the rest of the track, as if someone has left their out-of-tune TV on in the next room. This high pitch tone is unceasing, and derails and distracts from what would otherwise be a unique and intriguing performance. As a whole, *New Air* shows us a fine group of musicians with absolutely impeccable ears interacting at the highest levels, but sometimes these interactions reveal a leaderless collective, who are a bit tentative and unclear as to the direction the music should take, leaving us with some promising performances that don't quite reach their full potential.